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AUTHOR	Dunkelberger, J. E.; And Others
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ABSTRACT

In 1965, a youth aspiration study was initiated in six southern states. Data were first collected in 1966 from 10th grade students in selected high schools. In 1968, 12th grade students attending the same schools completed questionnaires. Then, in 1972, a stratified random sample was taken of 1,226 young adults who were previously examined. This paper is a preliminary report on the educational aspiration and attainment data for this regional sample. Attention focused on the nature of change in educational aspiration over the critical period in life from late adolescence to young adulthood. Educational attainment reflected the short-run achievements realized during the first years following the completion of high school. Aspiration as a theoretical construct was not considered; the referent in this instance was restricted to educational goals for which the aspiration serves as an abstract or idealized goal orientation. Within this frame of reference, the paper describes: (1) what happens to educational aspiration during the transition period; and (2) the level of educational attainment at an early point in adult life. Findings revealed that this sample was even more strongly oriented toward college and graduate study after having been out of high school 4 years. Urban white males were most oriented toward these goals; rural white females were the least. Black men and women from both rural and urban backgrounds were substantially equal in their orientation toward college. (KM)

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Educational Aspirations and Attainment of Southern Rural Youth*

J. E. Dunkelberger, N. G. Stuart, Auburn University
C. R. Sollie, Mississippi State University

In 1965, a youth aspiration study was initiated by researchers in six Southern states. Data were first collected in 1966, from students attending the 10th grade in selected high schools. A second contact was made in 1968, when 12th grade students attending the same high schools completed questionnaires. Then in 1972, a stratified random sample of young adults from among those youth who had completed questionnaires as both 10th and 12th grade students was located and interviewed. A regional sample of 1,226 young adults for which comparable data were available for each of the three reference points resulted.[1]

The present paper represents a preliminary report on the educational aspiration and attainment data for this regional sample. Attention is focused on the nature of change in educational aspiration over the critical period in life extending from late adolescence to young adulthood. Educational attainment reflects the short-run achievements realized during the first four years following the completion of high school.

Aspiration, as a theoretical construct, has been discussed by a number of researchers and will not concern us here.[2] Suffice it to

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[1]Data were not available for Louisiana youth in 1966 and Mississippi youth in 1968, thus increasing the magnitude of the no information categories for these two years.

[2]A. O. Haller and I. W. Miller, The Occupational Aspiration Scale: Theory, Structure, and Correlates, East Lansing, Michigan: Michigan Agricultural Experiment Station, Bulletin 288, 1966; W. P. Kuvlesky and R. C. Bealer, "A Clarification of the Concept 'Occupational Choice'," Rural Sociology, 31 (September):265-276, 1966; W. H. Sewell, A. O. Haller, and A. Portes, "The Educational and Early Occupational Attainment Process", American Sociological Review, 34 (February):82-92, 1969.

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say that the referent in this instance is restricted to educational goals for which the aspiration serves as an abstract or idealized goal orientation. This is a contrast to a goal expectation which is conceptualized as being tempered by the realities of the situation and by the individual's capabilities for attainment. In addition, there is a realized level of educational attainment for any individual at a given point in time. Level of attainment refers to this achievement.

Within this frame of reference, there existed two objectives in this paper:

(1) to describe what happens to educational aspiration during the period of transition from youth to adulthood.

(2) to describe the level of educational attainment at an early point in adult life.

Educational Aspiration

Measurement of educational aspiration was made at three separate points in time. The question used was "if you could have as much schooling as you desired, which of the following would you do? 1) quit school, 2) complete high school, 3) complete a vocational or business school program, 4) graduate from a junior college, 5) graduate from college, or 6) complete a professional or academic degree program." This question was included in both the 1966, 1968 and 1972 questionnaires to provide comparable data on the educational aspiration of each individual.

Aspiration of Males

Rural whites. There was a tendency for their educational goals (Table 1) to change over the total time period toward higher ranking levels of education. An increase from 6 to 9 per cent occurred between 1966 and 1968 in the proportion desiring only high school graduation but this proportion decreased again four years after high school to only 5 per cent. Between 1966 and 1968 the proportion desiring vocational training increased from 15 to 24 per cent and this proportion remained stable through 1972. Rural white males decreased over time in the proportions desiring junior college and college degrees but, conversely, increased relative to attending graduate school. In 1966 13 per cent aspired to graduate training, compared to more than 20 per cent expressing this desire in 1968. By 1972 a large 43 per cent desired a graduate school education. Thus, the change was toward technical and business training, on the one hand, and toward professional training on the other.

Rural blacks. A generally similar pattern of change was observed here. The proportion desiring only to complete high school increased between the sophomore and senior years, but declined sharply by 1972, after respondents had been out of high school four years. The proportions were 4, 12, and 3 per cent, respectively. Males aspiring to vocational training increased 10 per cent to 30 per cent in 1968, and stabilized at that level. The desire for both junior college and college goals declined between 1968 and 1972, while the proportion desiring graduate training increased. In 1972, 44 per cent of the rural black males aspired to complete some type of graduate school training. There is no evidence to show that educational aspirations differ much between white and black rural males.

Urban whites and blacks. The educational aspirations of urban males of both races were much the same as for those observed among rural males except that the emphasis on high ranking goals was even more pronounced. Approximately 81 per cent of the urban white males desired a college education in 1972, with 59 per cent wishing to attend graduate or professional school. Among urban black males, 75 per cent desired to attend college, with 57 per cent oriented toward graduate training. These findings clearly indicate the similarity in aspiration between whites and blacks while showing the differential impact that residence has on educational aspirations of young men.

Aspirations of Females

Rural whites. A constant 30 per cent of these women (Table 2) desired vocational or business training at all three points in time. The most prominent finding, however, was the extent to which their educational aspirations were oriented toward a college degree and post-college graduate and professional training. This goal was increasingly more common with each subsequent observation. More women aspired to these levels as seniors than as sophomores and still more did so as young adults than had as seniors. All other categories were marked by an inverse pattern of decreased goal orientation.

Rural blacks. The proportions oriented toward the various goal levels showed only minor variation from that of rural white women. A large proportion (about 28 per cent) at each reference point desired vocational or business training. The largest proportion, however, desired a college education and additional graduate training. More black women were consistently oriented to the highest goal level of graduate training than were whites, although the difference for the combined college degree level was only slightly larger. In 1972, 62 per cent of the black women desired a college education with a large proportion (41 per cent) comprised of those desiring to attain post-college training.

Urban whites and blacks. Young women in urban places generally held higher educational aspirations than did rural women. In urban areas there was a more marked difference associated with race. Black women had higher educational aspirations than did white women. This difference was especially apparent relative to the desire for graduate and professional training. At every time reference point a larger proportion of blacks than whites were oriented toward this goal. Moreover, the proportion increased as both groups of women proceeded into adulthood.

The only other sizeable differences or changes noted were with regards to the goals of vocational or business training and junior college degree. Among white females there was a strong orientation toward a junior college degree during the sophomore year which declined about half (to 9 per cent) by the senior year and remained constant over the next 4 years. A small but constant decrease from 19 to 16 per cent occurred in the proportion desiring vocational or business training. Black women were much less oriented toward a junior college degree (2 to 4 per cent) at all referent points. Also, the proportion desiring vocational or business training was about the same for blacks as for whites in 1972, whereas, when still in high school, the blacks identified considerably more with this goal.

Educational Attainment

In order to determine the level of education attained each panel member was asked to indicate the highest degree received or educational program completed. The word "completed" is the key qualifying condition and must be born in mind when interpreting these results. For many of these young people, their educational pursuits particularly college and post-college, had not been completed as of four years after high school graduation. These data do not reflect partial completion of degree or certificate programs regardless of whether the individual was still actively enrolled or not. No recognition at all was given for programs only partially completed.

Attainment for Males

Only a small proportion of these young men had completed college, Table 3. More than half had completed no additional schooling beyond high school. This proportion ranged from a low of 54 per cent among white urban males to 78 per cent among black urban males. Since the differences in aspirational orientation of males were not large, these short-run attainment differences were of special interest.

Vocational and business training programs (including those received in military service) were the most common accomplishment beyond high school. This was true among both blacks and whites. The range was from 14 to 38 per cent across the race and residence groupings with differences observed relative to both. Rural blacks were most likely (more than one-forth) to have completed vocational training, whereas urban men of both races were least likely (15 per cent).

Completion of a junior college program had been achieved by only a small proportion of these men. More whites than blacks were found to have done so.. The proportion of urban whites was 11 per cent.

Almost 20 per cent of urban white males had completed college and had received their degrees. By comparison only 12 per cent of the rural whites and 5 per cent of the rural and urban blacks had achieved this goal level. Although the educational pursuits of many young men were still in progress or were temporarily delayed by military service or employment, the racial differences in attainment, even for this selected sample of high school graduates, was rather apparent. One might anticipate that if these early attainments are indicative of a racial difference in college attendance, then this gap will become even more distinct in subsequent years. The proportion of white males graduating from college will expand at a disproportionate rate over that of black males. At the same time the residential difference does not appear to be too important in early educational attainment.

Attainment for Females

As of 1972, between 60 and 70 per cent of these women had not completed any post high school education, Table 3. Little difference was observed between the rural and urban reared in this regard. On the other hand, a difference approaching 10 per cent existed between white and black women. Fewer blacks than whites had completed additional education or training.

This racial difference occurred almost exclusively in the smaller proportion of black women who had completed college. Vocational and business school and junior college graduates were about equally distributed among both racial groups and both types of residence backgrounds. The number who completed junior college was small, whereas the proportion receiving technical and business training was considerably larger (16 per cent).

Four years after completing high school, the educational attainment levels of men and women reveal a more similar pattern than might have been predicted. Only a relatively small proportion of both sexes had made the transition from high school diploma to college

degree following the traditional four year tract. Apparently, the varying sets of circumstances encountered by young adults, such as marriage and childbearing for females and military service for males, that appear to operate selectively on persons of one sex must counterbalance in the short-run.

Educational attainment among males approaches the same levels as do aspirations in two categories -- vocational or business training and junior college. Under-attainment at these same levels was quite marked among females. Of course, the major discrepancy was encountered between the large proportion of high school students in general who aspired to college education. Four years after completing high school only a very small proportion had achieved this goal. It is expected that this proportion will increase dramatically in the next few years. There should be a corresponding decrease in the proportion lacking completed post-high school training. At this point, the association between educational aspiration and attainment is still tenuous and predictive of goals yet to be achieved over a longer span of time.

Conclusions

These findings for the nature of educational aspiration change between late adolescence and young adulthood revealed that this sample of youth were even more strongly oriented toward college and post college, graduate education after they had been out of high school for four years. As young adults it was the urban white males who were most oriented toward these high level goals, while rural white females were least oriented. Black men and women from both rural and urban backgrounds were substantially equal in their orientations toward college, although the orientation was somewhat more pronounced among urban residents. This was not true among whites, however. The educational goals of the males were higher than those of the women regardless of residence type.

In terms of actual attainment, there was a short-run similarity between aspirations and attainments for both males and females in regard to vocational and junior college educations. Contrastingly, the proportions having completed college degrees were very small relative to the proportions who aspired to complete college. With the respondents only four years out of high school, a closer matching of aspirations and attainments relative to college should be achieved in the near future. Sex and race differences in attainment are reflected by these findings. Women, especially, were under-attainers as were blacks.

Table 2. Comparison of Educational Aspiration Levels Over Time for Southern Rural and Urban Reared White and Black Females During Late Adolescence and Young Adulthood.

Level of Educational Aspiration	White						Black					
	Rural			Urban			Rural			Urban		
	66	68	72	66	68	72	66	68	72	66	68	72
	Percent											
Complete High School or Less	11	8	4	9	5	1	5	7	1	7	2	2
Complete Vocational or Business Training	31	30	30	19	17	16	30	27	28	32	21	18
Complete Jr. College	6	5	6	16	9	10	4	11	9	5	2	5
Complete College	21	22	26	28	35	20	19	19	21	16	30	25
Complete Graduate or Professional Degree	10	17	33	20	22	53	15	24	41	30	39	50
No Data Available	21	18	1	8	12	--	27	12	--	10	6	--

Note: Data were not available in 1966 for Louisiana youth (231 cases) and in 1968 for Mississippi youth (147 cases). The effect of this is to reduce the proportion of cases in each category. The effect is least pronounced in the categories with the smallest number of aspirants and most pronounced in the highly desired categories.

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Complete Vocational or Business Training	31	30	30	19	17	16	30	27	28	32	21	18
Complete Jr. College	6	5	6	16	9	10	4	11	9	5	2	5
Complete College	21	22	26	28	35	20	19	19	21	16	30	25
Complete Graduate or Professional Degree	10	17	33	20	22	53	15	24	41	30	39	50
No Data Available	21	18	1	8	12	--	27	12	--	10	6	--

Note: Data were not available in 1966 for Louisiana youth (231 cases) and in 1968 for Mississippi youth (147 cases). The effect of this is to reduce the proportion of cases in each category. The effect is least pronounced in the categories with the smallest number of aspirants and most pronounced in the highly desired categories.

Table 3. Educational Attainment in 1972 for a Panel of Southern Youth 4 Years After Completing High School by Sex, Race and Residence as a Teenager.

Level of Educational Attainment	Male				Female			
	White		Black		White		Black	
	Rural	Urban	Rural	Urban	Rural	Urban	Rural	Urban
	Percent							
Complete High School or Less	59	54	62	70	62	59	69	68
Complete Vocational or Business Training	20	15	20	14	16	16	17	16
Complete Jr. College	8	11	5	--	5	8	5	5
Complete College	12	18	5	4	18	17	7	11

Note: No information was available for 8 males and 2 females.